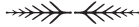


# 1



## Fi

**FI PUSHED OPEN** the door and stepped into the dingy tavern known as the Silver Baron. The bang of the door closing behind her raised a flock of crows pecking the dry dust outside, and the shadows of their wings against the window drew the attention of the crowded room. Suspicious faces peered at her over pewter cups of dark wine and the scraps of finished meals. Fi pulled her hat down over her eyes. She made her way through the tables and took a seat at the counter, where she could watch everyone in the room without looking like she was watching them. She had business here today, the kind that might attract unwanted attention.

“Lemon tea, if you have it,” she said, catching a barmaid by the elbow. The dark-haired woman sashayed away with a clipped *milord*.

Fi was actually *Lady Filore Nenroa*, the title official since

she'd turned seventeen a few months back, but that was probably not immediately obvious between her dusty brown jacket and her low-brimmed hat. It kept the sun off her face when she was traveling and also, apparently, was not terrible for keeping a low profile. So far no one in Darfell had recognized Fi, but it was only a matter of time.

She slid a creased map out of her pocket and onto the bar—then snatched it up again as the serving girl clanked down her cup so hard tea sloshed into the saucer. Carefully, she unfolded the map to reveal the torn scrap of parchment hidden inside—the real reason she had come to this tavern.

The Silver Baron hadn't changed much in the year Fi had been gone. The patrons seemed as disreputable as ever. A hard-faced woman played chicken with a quicksilver dagger, stabbing it into the scarred tabletop between her spread fingers, and a raucous game of dice was punctuated by harsh barks of laughter and the clink of money changing hands. A sallow, balding man deep into his cups eyed her from the end of the bar. Toward the back were private enclaves hidden behind thick wine-red curtains, for small gatherings of nobles and those who didn't want their faces known. No one stood out, but then, Fi didn't know who she was looking for. She slid the scrap of parchment into the cup of her palm, frowning at the messy scrawl.

*Meet me at the Silver Baron at sundown. I have an offer you can't refuse. No signature.*

The note had been slipped under her door at the Iron Lantern Inn, where she'd been staying the last two days. Her first instinct—probably her best instinct—had been to pack up and leave town. But every time she reached for her travel

bags, she found herself lifting the note instead, studying the puzzle it presented. Who knew she was back in Darfell? And what did they mean, *an offer you can't refuse?*

Fi drummed her fingers against the counter, staring at the black fingerless glove on her left hand. The crumpled map was scratched with harsh Xs, drawn in her own frustrated hand, as search after search failed to turn up what she was looking for. Following a mysterious note to a place like the Silver Baron was an act of desperation.

She pulled off her hat and set it on the bar. Her skin was tan, her cheeks dusted with freckles from hours in the sun. She ran her hand through her dark brown hair, which was just long enough to trap in a small ponytail at the nape of her neck. She wasn't keeping a low profile because she was a fugitive, nor was she up to anything shady enough to take place in the back rooms of the Silver Baron. She was just avoiding her ex.

*He* had been her first horrible guess as to the author of the message, but cryptic notes weren't his style. And she'd never known *him* to sign off without a telltale flourish from his silver-tipped quill. That didn't leave her with a lot of suspects.

Fi lifted the cup of tea, tipping it to study the yellowish liquid before taking a sip. Only years of practice at being polite kept her from spitting it out. It was supposed to be lemon tea. It tasted more like an old lemon rind steeped in a bucket of rinse water.

"Master," Fi said, signaling the tall man with the neatly trimmed beard who was wiping glasses behind the bar. "This isn't tea. I think you may have poured water in a dirty cup."

The man's expression said that's what she got for ordering tea in a place like the Silver Baron. "I can throw it out for you free of charge."

Fi snorted. She'd spent the last year in the coastal nation of Pizarre, where exotic teas and spices had come in from the ports every day. She let herself get lost in the memory of salt air and long afternoons in the giant library with a wall of windows that overlooked the sea, lush green lemon trees swaying in the breeze. Then she wiped the dirt from her brow and shook it away.

This wasn't Pizarre—this wasn't even the same kingdom. This was the town of Raven's Roost on the eastern edge of Darfell, nestled up in the Cragspires a stone's throw from the fallen kingdom of Andar. She was going to have to get used to border living again: harsh terrain; roughing it; and other, less pleasant things.

Her eyes slid to the posting board beside the bar. Among the Border Master's bounties on wanted criminals and merchants' calls for muscle for hire hung a scatter of notices and hand-drawn sketches of suspected Witches in the area. This time it wasn't the tea that pinched her face. The Witch Hunters were getting bolder if they'd started to hang their notices out in the open, even in a place like the Silver Baron.

The Witch Hunters were a vicious cult who believed all magic was corrupt and vowed to stop Andar from ever being restored—probably the only ones left, after a hundred years, who still believed the great kingdom of magic could be saved. They operated mostly in the scorched, lawless wastes of Andar, looting magic relics and chasing Witches out of the fallen kingdom. Raids over the border into Darfell used

to be rare, but recently they'd started coming after Witches in the border towns, where the Guard was always stretched too thin. Fi's eyes lingered on the rough sketch of a man with wispy hair and a large crystal earring.

She fisted her gloved hand under the counter. There wasn't anything she could do. Witch Hunters were outlawed in Darfell, but they still operated in secret, vanishing into the hills whenever the Border Guard was dispatched. Worse, it seemed like the harder life got in Darfell, the more people were willing to look the other way. The cities on the border had once been the most prosperous in Darfell, bustling with merchants coming and going from Andar. But ever since the great kingdom of magic collapsed, the whole area had been in steady decline, leaving a lot of hard, hungry, desperate people.

The door swung open with a bang, and a figure swaggered into the tavern. A short, stocky girl headed toward her, wearing a rust-red coat that fell to her knees over a gray tunic and a scuffed pair of dark pants. Her ash-brown hair was braided and wound into a knot, and a battle-ax was slung across her back, its dull head gleaming between her shoulder blades. But what really caught Fi's attention were the heavy boots with thick soles and wedge heels. Those she would recognize anywhere. They were a custom design that gave a few extra inches of height to the young woman who went with them.

*Shane—the huntsman for hire.*

Fi set her teacup in its saucer and tucked the map back into her pocket as Shane elbowed her way through the tables instead of going politely around. She slung herself onto the high stool next to Fi. Her heavy canvas pack hit the floor with a thud.

Fi waved the note. “You,” she said flatly. “You sent me this?”

“Yep.” Shane grinned. The girl hailed from the Steelwight Islands of the north, but she’d been in the borderlands long enough to dress like all the other rugged scouts and explorers—namely, in well-worn travel clothes with a thick layer of dirt, her fair skin sunburned in the cheeks. Her sea-gray eyes studied Fi. “You’re a hard one to track down.”

“Clearly not hard enough,” Fi muttered, pushing her tea away. It certainly wasn’t fit for drinking. “How’d you find me?”

“A mutual friend told me you were back in town,” Shane said, shrugging her eyebrows.

Fi’s gaze darted to the wall of posters, seeking out the man with the crystal earring. Shane leaned forward over the bar, craning to see. Her face twisted into a scowl when she realized what Fi was looking at.

“Oh, no they don’t!” Shane pushed up from her seat and stalked over to the Witch notices.

Conversation at a few of the tables trailed off. Shane crossed her arms, staring up at the wall before raising a hand and ripping down through the overlapping posters. She was short enough, even in the boots, that she had to jump to get the highest ones. She landed heavily and turned to glare at the room. Fi wasn’t sure whether Shane was so mad because the *mutual friend* they’d been discussing featured prominently on the board, or whether she just hated Witch Hunters in general. Shane was well-known for her aggressive brand of justice—the tavern was probably lucky she hadn’t buried her ax in the wall.

Shane crumpled the last scrap of paper into a ball, spinning to face the bar master. “You,” she warned. “Don’t let those scum post their garbage here!”

“It’s a public board,” the master said, not looking all that concerned—either by the notices themselves or the fact that they were now in shreds on the floor. Shane huffed.

Satisfying as it might be to make a scene, the kind of patrons who frequented the Silver Baron weren’t likely to be shamed by one angry huntsman. Fi didn’t tell Shane that, though. She wasn’t in the mood for a fight. They’d only worked together a couple of times before, and never closely, but she hadn’t forgotten the girl’s temper.

Shane thumped into her seat backward so she was facing out toward the silenced room with her elbows crooked up on the bar, daring anyone to have something to say. Nobody met her eyes. “Cowards,” Shane hissed.

Fi shook her head. “Isn’t this a little out of your way for a social call?”

“Actually, I have a proposition for you,” Shane said.

Fi rolled her eyes. *A proposition* for her and everyone else in the place, since every ear was turned toward them.

“You sure you want to be *propositioning* so publicly?”

Shane snorted out a laugh and threw up her shoulder in a shrug that said she didn’t particularly care. Then again, she wasn’t the one trying not to attract attention. Fi fought down a wave of irritation.

“Master, we’ll take one of the back rooms.” She pulled two copper coins from the pouch at her waist and slid them across the bar.

The man put down his cleaning rag to retrieve his money, then raked a disapproving gaze over Shane's ax. "No weapons in the back."

"I don't carry any." Fi lifted the edges of her jacket and spun in a circle to show her belt. Aside from her money pouch, all she carried was a rope tied off with a blunt ring, fastened in a tight curl.

"And I'm not disarming for this," Shane added.

The master was unmoved. "Ax stays out front, or you do."

"You're not going to part me from my stuff!" Shane warned hotly, clearly winding up for precisely the kind of public display Fi was trying to avoid.

"I'll do it, then." Fi ducked behind Shane, deftly sliding the ax from its straps. It was heavier than she'd expected, and the metal head lurched toward the floor before she heaved it onto the bar. Now that she was looking closer, she could see how fine the weapon was, the wooden handle worn but polished, and the single curved blade inlaid with a design of interlacing knots. She kicked Shane's overstuffed pack under a stool. "There, problem solved," she said, pushing Shane toward the back.

"I have everything in that pack memorized, down to the balls of lint!" Shane yelled over her shoulder. "And I'll know if you've so much as polished the spots off that ax!"

Fi shook her head, giving the girl an extra push into the curtains of one of the enclaves. "Stop making a scene." With the way she acted, it was hard to believe Shane was a year older than Fi.

The small enclave was thick with shadows, lit only by the flicker of tall candles in cast-iron candlesticks. A round



table and chairs hunched against the wall. The heavy velvet curtain muffled the sound from the bar as it swirled closed behind them.

“You know, that guy only took my ax,” Shane said, throwing herself into one of the high-backed chairs. “I could easily be killing you back here with a hidden dagger.”

“But it would be much harder to destroy the furniture while you did it,” Fi pointed out, sitting carefully on the edge of her seat, “which I think was his bigger concern.”

Shane chuckled, tipping back in her chair. “I forgot how sharp you can be.”

“Feel free to leave anytime,” Fi offered blandly.

“I meant it as a compliment!” Shane protested. “And anyway, we’d both regret that. Didn’t you read my note? I have an opportunity you can’t refuse.” Fi threw her a look, but Shane leaned over the table, suddenly serious. “I found something when I was exploring a ruin down by Haverfall. It’s a map—one you’re going to want a look at.”

Fi clicked her tongue, refusing to be baited. “There are a lot of maps floating around, most of them for ruins long discovered. What’s so special about this one?”

Shane grinned like a fiend. “It’s in the Witches’ Jewelry Box,” she said, pulling a piece of paper out of her tunic and laying it down with a flourish.

The map looked ancient. Through the splotches and creases, Fi recognized the range of high mountains that reared up just beyond Raven’s Roost. Within them lay a deep valley riddled with alpine lakes and high waterfalls, all clustered around the river that cut the gorge like a vein.

Up until a hundred years ago, the area had been part of

Andar. Treasure hunters called it the Witches' Jewelry Box because, for a thousand years before the fall, Witches had congregated there, building secret manors and hideaways, strongholds and stargazing towers tucked into switchbacks or teetering on cliffs—now a string of lost ruins studding the river canyon like jewels on a chain. They'd been abandoned when Andar fell and the Witches fled. Technically it was within Darfell's border these days. The whole valley was a crisscross of traps and counter traps, with entire buildings designed to safeguard relics and treasures of long-dead Orders of Magic.

Fi's eyes scoured the map. She frowned, peering closer. "I think someone played you for a fool. There's nothing here." Besides the geographical features, there were no marks at all—there weren't even any roads.

"Watch."

Shane held the map up to the candle, so close Fi worried there wouldn't be a map in a second. Then she saw it. Something was starting to appear—dark lines of ink revealed by the heat, bleeding across the parchment like water soaking into the page. *Invisible ink*. When the lines stopped spreading, the river in the center of the Witches' Jewelry Box was overlaid with thick curls of vines, each one hung with blossoming ochre roses.

Fi pressed her finger to the page, tracing the complex whorls and loops in astonishment. "These aren't just vines. They're words in one of the magic languages." There had been countless Orders of Magic throughout Andar's long history. Many of them crafted their own languages to keep their spells secret. "It's the Order of the Divine Rose."

“I figured that much,” Shane said. “The roses were a dead giveaway.”

*Was it possible?* The Order of the Divine Rose was the oldest and most powerful of all of them, and every Witch in the royal line had been a member. Shane was right. This wasn’t just any treasure map.

“Now you can see why I brought this to you. What’s it say?” Shane asked.

Fi leaned close, breathing in the scent of old paper as she studied the intricate letters. “It says, *among the roses.*”

“Well, that’s not much of a hint,” Shane grumbled. “There are a dozen roses on that vine. You mean the map could be pointing to any one of them?”

“No. It’s none of them.” Fi couldn’t keep her excitement out of her voice anymore. “At the top of the vines—see how there’s one rosebud that hasn’t blossomed yet?” She pointed to a spot northwest of the gorge, perched on the edge of a cliff. “Sometimes the Witches of the Divine Rose used a rosebud to indicate something hidden in their scrolls—things too important to write down, in case they fell into the wrong hands.”

Shane squinted at the paper. “But that cliff’s less than a day’s hike from here—it’s not even in the canyon! How has nobody found it after all this time?”

Fi shook her head. “I guess I’ll find out when I get there.” A curl of anticipation teased her stomach, but she tried not to seem too eager. “How much are you selling the map for?” she asked, thinking about her slightly thin purse.

“Selling?” Shane snorted. “I’m not selling it. I’m looking for a partner. You used to be a treasure hunter—*used to*

*be* pretty good at it, too. I can't imagine all your skills have dulled during your grand travels."

"None of my skills have dulled," Fi snapped back.

"Great." Shane smacked the table. "Then you're hired. Standard agreement: All treasure goes to me, all books and boring historical stuff to you, and nobody touches any magic relics."

That breakdown worked fine for Fi, unless they found only treasure—though she supposed it would be equally unfortunate for Shane if they found only books.

"Wait," Fi protested. "I haven't agreed yet."

"You will," Shane said, smug. "Your eyes haven't left this map since I pulled it out."

Fi felt her cheeks getting hot. She prided herself on having a good poker face, but Shane had seen right through her. *Way to keep your cards close to the vest*, she thought, annoyed.

"Fine." Fi reached her hand out over the table. "We do this one job, then go our separate ways."

"One job," Shane agreed, seizing her hand. It was a rough handshake, like everything else about Shane.

"Meet me at the crossroads past the old watchtower two hours before dawn," Fi said, already calculating what she'd want to bring on an expedition like this.

Shane gave a pained groan. "Two hours *before* dawn? No wonder you can't keep a partner."

Fi's chest gave an unpleasant squeeze. It was only a gibe, like the other insults they'd been trading, but it hit a little too close to home. She'd only ever had one partner, after all, and now—well, now she didn't.

Something must have shown on her face, because Shane was suddenly backpedaling.

“Sorry. Forget it, I’m just hungry. Oh, and in case you were wondering about that note—I’m actually in the room next to yours at the Iron Lantern. That’s how I found you so easily.” Shane snatched the priceless map, bunching it up and shoving it back into her shirt. “I’m going to go scare up some grub.” She nearly got into a fight with the curtain as she made a hasty exit.

“I’d recommend a different tavern,” Fi called. The after-taste of the sour tea still curdled on her tongue. She wouldn’t risk a meal here.

The curtain whispered closed, leaving Fi alone with her thoughts. She was about to have another partner, even though she’d sworn never to go down that road again. At least Shane was nothing like her former partner—now her ex in every sense of the word.

Slowly, Fi worked the fingerless glove off and set it aside. She held up her hand beside the guttering candle, looking for the thousandth time at the butterfly mark burned into her palm—a stylized swallowtail, dark as ink, with long tails that trailed over her wrist before curling in toward the sharp, angular wings. It was a curse mark, and it had been her old partner’s parting gift to her a year ago, before she fled Darfell.

Fi curled her fingers into a fist. She had come back for one reason: to find a way to break the Butterfly Curse. She’d searched so many ruins, buried herself in old libraries of forgotten books, and none of them had held the answer she

was seeking. Shane's map could be just another dead end. But the Witches of the Divine Rose had been masters of warding and protection magic. Maybe they'd left something behind, something that could help her. Maybe this was finally her chance to wipe the slate clean and get rid of the ugly mark.

She wasn't the same person she had been a year ago, and she wasn't going to make the same mistakes.

No more partners. It was safer that way—especially for the heart.